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SUBJECT: LOST IN THAILAND'S TSUNAMI: BURMESE MIGRANT WORKERS

REF: BANGKOK 306

1. (SBU) Summary. The Royal Thai government (RTG) has earned international plaudits for its responsiveness to western tourists and Thais affected by the tsunami. Roughly 30,000 Burmese migrants, employed in construction, fisheries, and hotels in three devastated provinces, remain marginalized in official assistance efforts, however. Many survivors appear to have returned to Burma or moved to other provinces in search of employment. Significant numbers stayed, and are camping in rubber plantations and forests, with little or no assistance. Jobless, subject to arrest and deportation, this population is at risk for trafficking. RTG estimates of migrant deaths suggest about 250 - 350 perished in the three provinces. NGOs believe 2,500 died in a single district alone. Language barriers, and distrust of RTG officials, means few of the Burmese dead will be identified. End Summary.

2. What Happened to the Burmese Migrants?

(U) Over 62,700 Burmese migrants are registered in Phuket, Phang Nga and Krabi provinces, the three areas most affected by Thailand's December 26 tsunami. (UN and NGO observers believe another 20 - 30 percent of resident migrants are illegally present, suggesting a total population well over 80,000.) Of this large group, 23,800 registered workers (and another 7,000 or so illegal) were in high-risk economic sectors that bore the brunt of the disaster's impact: commercial fishing, construction and hotel staff. NGOs and Royal Thai government (RTG) agencies reported many of those employed in affected economic sectors, in shock and without employers, wished to return to Burma. The U.S. NGO World Vision, assisting destitute migrants return to Burma via a transit center in Ranong (Ref), reported that about 700 registered workers returned voluntarily through the facility until it closed on January 16th. Another 800 returned to Kawthoung (Burma) without assistance. Others appear to have fled to rubber plantations and wooded areas inland in Phang Nga and Krabi. A local NGO reported that 3,000 surviving Burmese, formerly resident in a Phang Nga fishing village devastated by the disaster, are now sheltering in a forested area nearby. About 320 Burmese families, including pregnant women and children, reportedly fled to the hills above the resort area of Khao Lak. On January 22-23, a U.S. NGO provided the group with food and baby formula, which is using plastic sheeting for shelter. Similar reports of migrants living in difficult conditions have been received from Krabi province. Although no estimates are available, a large proportion of migrants are believed to have moved to other inland provinces to look for new employment - a move that legally has to be reported to the RTG Ministry of Labor (MOL). To date, only 450 registered workers have requested MOL permission to move, however.

3. The Thai Government Responds

(SBU) On January 10 - 11, Laboff met with senior officials in the MOL and Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS), the two main government agencies providing services to tsunami survivors, to encourage increased outreach efforts to affected Burmese migrants. MOL Deputy Permanent Secretary Thapabutr Jamasevi asserted that registered foreign workers "have exactly the same rights" as Thai citizens in requesting job placement, severance pay and other benefits under the Labor Protection Act. Similarly, MSDHS Permanent Secretary Wallop Phloytabthim claimed that migrants received "identical treatment" with Thais. However, Wallop acknowledged that few Burmese migrants had approached local MSDHS officials for assistance, speculating that they were "afraid" to request shelter in an internally displaced person camp established by the RTG in Phang Nga province. (That camp now holds approximately 4,000 Thais.) MOL assistance is similarly limited to date: an official report dated 18 January claimed medical treatment at area hospitals was provided for 500 registered workers. Otherwise, services have been confined to the voluntary repatriation of registered workers to Burma, processing the relatively few requests to change to employers

in other provinces, and providing USD 125 for "body preparation" services for four deceased migrants.

14. Widely Differing Estimates of Migrant Deaths

(U) Several Thai NGOs that work with Burmese migrants completed preliminary surveys of tsunami affected areas the week of January 10 - 17. The Migrant Assistance Project and Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association estimated 2,500 migrants died in the hardest hit area, Khao Lak District in Phang Nga province, where there were 9,800 (mostly fishermen) registered. The NGOs developed the estimate by interviewing villagers to determine how many fishing boats were lost; each vessel was then assumed to contain thirty Burmese fishermen. (Many boats had just returned from night fishing when the disaster struck, and were beached with crew asleep on board.) Other NGO reports offer limited snapshots of casualties: 200 migrant construction/hotel workers dead at Patong beach, Phuket; 270 fishermen perished in Baan Nam Khem fishing village, Phanga Nga province; "hundreds" more at another nearby fishing village. Official RTG estimates are much lower. Based on surveys of employers retaining registered workers, the MOL believes only 255 were killed by the tsunami (all in Phang Nga province), with another 200 missing in Phuket. Of the missing, some are believed by MOL officials to have returned informally to Burma.

15. IOM: Government Assistance Sub-Par

(SBU) An initial assessment by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) notes that RTG services to migrants fall far short of those provided to Thai nationals and western tourists in tsunami - affected areas. The January 10 report criticizes MOL efforts for focusing on registered migrants, ignoring the thousands who are unregistered. For those unregistered, quick deportations are the norm, which IOM characterized as a "politically convenient" way to deal with the alleged looting of damaged properties by Burmese. (The RTG immigration chief publicly accused the Burmese workers as "preying" on local Thais in wake of the disaster. Isolated cases of looting, in reality mostly perpetrated by Thais, were quickly blamed on migrants and the charge was widely believed.) Public health services are poor: by January 11, only 29 registered migrants had received treatment in Phanga Nga provincial hospital, which has seen over 620 tsunami patients since December 26. An attempt by NGO health workers to assess migrant health needs at one fishing village was met by violence on January 12, when Thai villagers imprisoned three Burmese staff of World Vision, and beat one Thai. (The villagers mistakenly believed the health team intended to repatriate the migrants, for whom fishing boat owners had paid registration fees.) Health and sanitation outreach to the large numbers living in forests and rubber plantations, and to those workers not registered, is currently limited or non-existent.

16. Comments.

(U) Migrant workers are by nature a highly mobile and somewhat hidden population. In the chaotic wake of Thailand's worst natural disaster, a large portion of the 30,000 in provinces and occupations most likely to have been affected are simply unaccounted for. Many likely moved quietly to other provinces in search for new employment, beyond the gaze of RTG officials and the handful of interested NGOs. Others may have returned to Burma at the many informal crossings along the porous border. A true accounting of the Burmese killed by the tsunami will never be made. For those whose bodies were found, few will be identified. In the six days immediately following the tsunami, Laboff did not encounter any Burmese searching for relatives among the hundreds of bodies strewn about make-shift morgues in Khao Lak district, Phang Nga province, nor were there Burmese language notices on the many missing persons boards. On December 29, the hasty cremation of dozens of Asian remains was observed at a Buddhist temple. Workers said that most remains had not been claimed by a group of Thai villagers waiting nearby, offering that "they are probably just Burmese." Concerned NGOs believe that language barriers, and a well-ingrained fear of Thai officialdom, accounts for the reluctance of migrants to identify compatriots who perished in the tsunami.

17. (SBU) Post advocacy efforts in the weeks ahead will focus on the living, particularly Burmese women and children who might be at risk of trafficking in persons. About 10,200 registered (and an estimated 3,000 unregistered) women were employed in tsunami-devastated economic sectors in the three most affected provinces, and many of these have certainly lost employers, putting them in danger.

BOYCE